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THE ETCHINGS OF JEAN FRANÇOIS MILLET

The issuance of a new edition of a work on the life and letters of Jean François Millet* again calls to public notice one of the greatest pictorial geniuses France has produced. One welcomes the kindly, sympathetic reminder, for, as Mrs. Henry Ady (Julia Cartwright), his biographer, rightly points out, the world moves on so fast, and new phases of art succeed each other with such surprising rapidity in the present day, that to many ears the name of the great peasant painter may have a remote and antiquated sound.

It is only twenty years since Millet died. But he has already taken his place among the classics, and the enormous prices that are paid for his works in England and America, as well as in France, prove how fully his genius is now recognized. He stands supreme among his contemporaries as the first painter of humanity who gave expression to modern ideas in noble and enduring form, and whose work will live when the passing fashions and momentary fancies of the day are forgotten.

I wish here, in the main, to concern myself with Millet's etchings. These are less familiar to the public than the artist's paintings, which by repeated reproductions have, in a sense, become the world's heritage. I do this especially in view of the fact that Mrs. Ady in her admirable volume, which I cordially recommend to all students



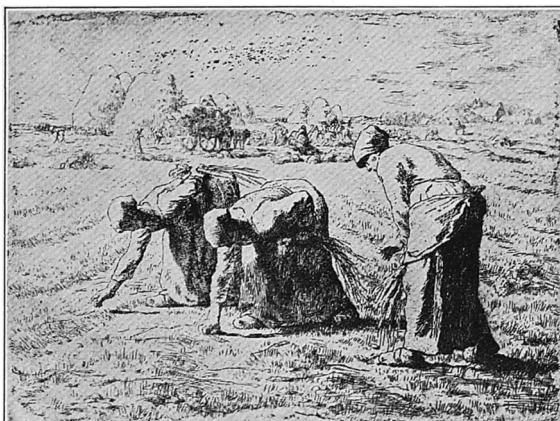
J. F. MILLET
By Himself

* "Jean François Millet," by Julia Cartwright. The Macmillan Company.



PEASANTS GOING TO WORK
By J. F. Millet

had all the courage and independence of his Norman ancestors, together with their simple faith and goodness. But although a peasant by birth and education, he was a man of remarkable culture. He had read widely and thought deeply, and was gifted not only with a poetic imagination of the highest order, but with fine literary instincts. His letters are full of grave and pregnant sentences, his



THE GLEANERS
By J. F. Millet

of Millet, sums up this branch of the artist's activities in a few words. These etchings, however—he produced all told only thirteen finished plates, though, counting sketches and different states of different plates, forty-four have been listed—are part and parcel of the artist's life-work, they bear the stamp that characterizes all his paintings, they are a peculiar witness, unique in art history, of the man's devotion to a lofty purpose. And a consideration of these plates naturally presupposes a word about Millet the man.

Apart from his artistic genius, Millet's personality is one of rare charm. He

conversation surprised men of letters by its terseness and originality. And if the natural melancholy of his nature was deepened by the hardships which he endured and the persecution to which he was exposed, a deep undercurrent of hope runs alike through his life and through his art.

The sense of tears, as Mrs. Ady aptly phrases it, may be felt in all that he ever painted, but it is lightened throughout by the radiance of the divine hope that cheered the poet's dreams. He belongs to "the great company of grief," who have stamped their thoughts on



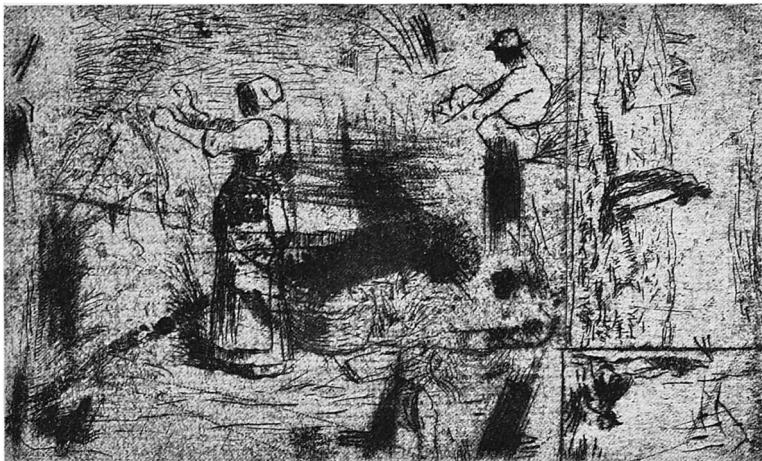
SKETCH
By J. F. Millet

the heart of this generation, who learned in suffering what they taught in song, and who, out of the seeming failures of a short and sorrowful life, have reared the fabric of an art that will live for all time. This undercurrent of seriousness, if not of sorrow, may be told in the artist's own words. In a letter to his friend and biographer, Alfred Sensier, apropos of three pictures destined for a sale, Millet says:

"To tell the truth, peasant subjects suit my nature best, for I must confess, at the risk of your taking me to be a socialist, that the human side is what touches me most in art, and that if I could only do what I like, or at least attempt to do it, I would paint nothing that was not the result of an impression directly received from nature, whether in landscape or in figures. The joyous side never shows itself to me; I know not if it exists, but I have never seen it. The gayest thing I know is the calm, the silence, which are so delicious, both in the forest and in the cultivated fields, whether the soil is good for culture

or not. You will confess that it always gives you a very dreamy sensation, and that the dream is a sad one, although often very delicious.

"You are sitting under a tree, enjoying all the comforts and quiet which it is possible to find in this life, when suddenly you see a poor creature loaded with a heavy faggot coming up the narrow path opposite. The unexpected and always striking way in which this figure appears before your eyes reminds you instantly of the sad fate of humanity—weariness. . . . Is this the gay and playful kind of



SKETCH
By J. F. Millet

work that some people would have us believe? Nevertheless, for me it is true humanity and great poetry." The witness of a noble soul.

This sympathy with the common people, this recognition of the poetry of repellent lot—this, then, was Millet's discovery, this the new gospel which he had to proclaim. Mrs. Ady rightly emphasizes the fact that before his time the peasant had never been held a fit subject for art in France. Kings and queens, lords and ladies, might play at pastorals if they chose; *le Grand Monarque* might set the fashion by appearing in the character of Apollo—*le plus beau des bergers*—leading his flocks along the slopes of Parnassus; Marie Antoinette might put on peasant maid's skirts and milk her cows under the trees of her elegant dairy; but the *bergeries* of Trianon and the *paysans enrurbanés* of Watteau's Arcadia were as far removed from reality as possible. The polite world remained convinced of the truth of Madame de Staël's saying, and agreed with her that *l'agriculture*

sent le fumier. A group of peasants drinking or quarreling, a picturesque beggar, or even a pair of humble lovers at a cottage door might be tolerated; but no one was so audacious as to attempt the prosaic theme of a laborer at his work.

This Millet was the first to do. Born himself of a long race of yeomen, and familiar with every detail of rustic toil, he was admirably fitted both by nature and education for the task. He saw the dignity of labor, and knew by bitter experience the secrets of the poor. And the pathetic side of human life had for him an especial attraction. It is this side that he presents in the paintings over which the world has marveled, in his charcoal drawings and pastels, in his etchings, in everything he undertook. This was with him a passion.



THE MAN LEANING ON HIS SPADE
By J. F. Millet



TWO MEN DIGGING
By J. F. Millet

The man's earnestness amounted to nothing less than devotion to the task of recording this poetry of toil and travail. He was forever brooding over the lot of the weary; his mind literally teemed with ideas. His imagi-

nation conjured before him more touching pictures than he could put on canvas. This is the genesis of his enterprise in learning etching.

It was Millet's habit to have several pictures in hand at once, and to begin more than he ever had time to finish. At the beginning of 1860 he had, we learn, as many as twenty-five pictures in his atelier

in various stages of progress. Often he would set to work with ardor on a new subject, and then, just when, in the eyes of others, it seemed to be approaching completion, he would put it aside for no apparent reason, and take up some altogether new idea. In this way many half-finished pictures remained in his atelier sometimes for as many as twenty years. The "Hammeau Cousin," for instance, a view of an old farm near his home, which he commenced soon after his return from Gréville, late in the autumn of 1854, was only finished during the last year of his life.

This inability to record his impressions and give pictorial expression to his ideas forced upon him the conviction that he would never live long enough to paint all the pictures which he had in mind, and he

THE SPINNER
By J. F. Millet

was led to seek simpler, more direct, more expeditious means of expression. The old adage, "Art is long and time is fleeting," was for him a constant source of worriment, and during the winter of 1855-56 he made frequent visits to Paris for the purpose of learning the art of etching.

As a draftsman he was a consummate master, but for some reason he did not take readily to the needle and the copperplate. He ruined plate after plate, and to his regret wasted much time that he held so precious. Not infrequently he by accident left plates for a whole night in the bath, and again through inadvertence he would bite only



one portion of the plate perfectly, and in disgust would destroy it after one or two impressions had been taken. It did not take long to convince him that etching was not his forte, and he abandoned it



TOO HOT
By J. F. Millet

for pastel and charcoal as better suited to his purpose as a means of speedily recording his poetic dreams. He soon gave up the needle entirely, and left the world only his thirteen finished plates.

The first of his series of etchings was a boat at sea under a stormy sky, evidently, as Mrs. Ady remarks, a reminiscence of the Norman coast. Another, the seaweed gatherers—"Ramasseurs de Varech"—at the foot of the cliffs of Gréville, again recalled an impression of his

childhood. "La Couseuse," a young woman in a white cap sitting in a chair near a diamond-paned casement, at work on her husband's coat, is evidently taken from the drawing which the artist made of his wife in 1853. Two others, "La Baratteuse," a woman churning, a subject which he afterward repeated both in oils and water-colors, and a peasant pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with manure, also bear

the date of 1855. "La Veillée," two women sewing by the light of a lamp hanging on a pole by the side of a curtained bed, was executed early in 1856.

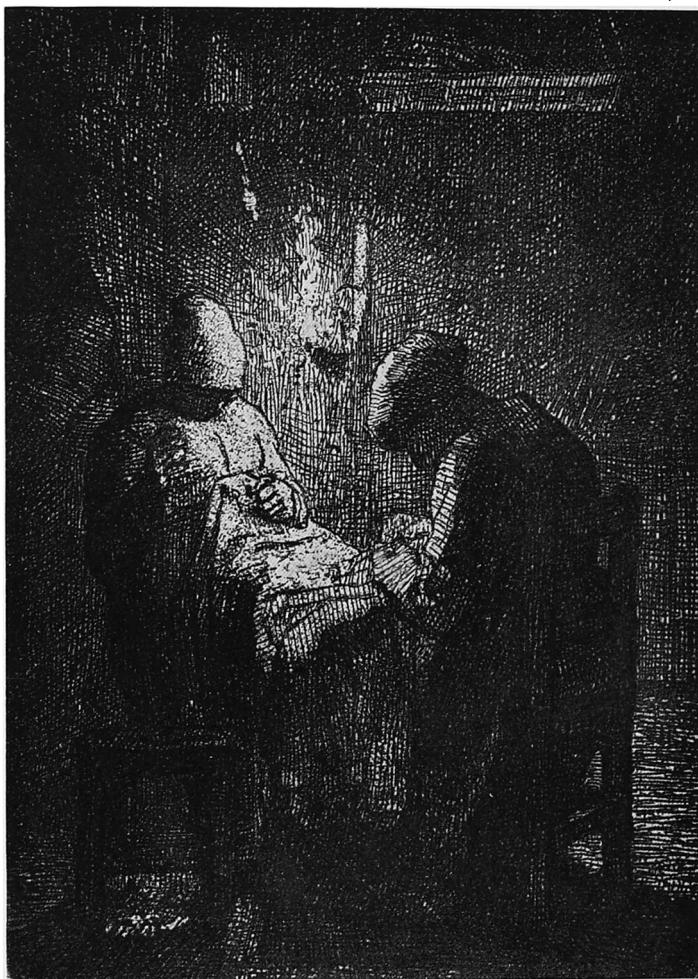
Other plates, which bear no date, but apparently form part of the same series, are, a woman carding wool, a child driving a flock of geese into the pond, a peasant woman leading two cows to pasture, a woman laying out clothes to dry, a man leaning on his spade, and a woman knitting. Four of the series are reproductions from well-known pictures. Two of these, "Allant Travailleur" and "Les Bêcheurs," belong to this period; the two others, perhaps the first of all Millet's etchings, "Les Glaneuses" and "La Grande Bergère," were executed



THE WOMAN CARDING WOOL
By J. F. Millet

several years later. One very rare plate, a young woman blowing on a spoonful of broth, which she is about to give to the child in her arms, bears the date of 1861, while another, the earliest ever attempted by Millet, representing a shepherd leaning on his staff between two sheep, is dated 1849, and signed with the name of Charles Jacque. This signature, Sensier tells us, was mischievously added by Jacque himself, one evening when Millet made his first attempt at etching under his direction on the corner of a table at the house of their mutual friend, the printer Delâtre.

Etching was thus with Millet, not a recreation or a pastime, not a mere meaningless experiment, not the following of a fad or a fashion: it was the deliberate adoption by him of an expeditious means of



THE WATCHERS
By J. F. Millet



recording his impressions. It was his hope, if I may be pardoned the expression, to acquire thus a sort of pictorial shorthand. And there is something little less than pathetic in Millet's thus seeking to master a new art for a purpose and being obliged to admit that his enterprise was abortive.

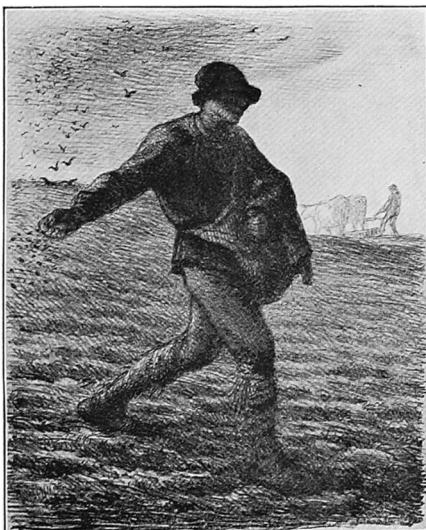
Of the quality and rank of these etchings by Millet opinions differ widely. Certainly, as fireside companions there is little about them that is attractive, as will be seen from the accompanying illustrations reproduced by courtesy of Albert Roullier. Mere prettiness or finish had no part in Millet's art theory or practice. There is nothing about them that would suggest their French origin. They have no grace, no vivacity, no *chic*. On the contrary, they are serious to a fault, and so shorn of lines of beauty as to be little less than repellent. Yet they are sincere, honest, faithful to facts, and of special interest, since most of them are the prototypes in miniature of canvases by the same artist which subsequently became famous.

Indeed, many have seen in these etchings indications of power that they did not see in the artist's more famous paintings. Thomas Moran, for instance, once said of Millet's etchings: "I like his etchings even better than his paintings; when he was painting he was mainly thinking of his color, but when he was etching he had nothing to think of but his drawing."

Mrs. Ady says in her book, to which reference has been made, that Millet's experiment in this branch of art cannot be said to have been successful. If she means by this that they were unsuccessful from the standpoint of the artist's purpose, one must, of course, agree with her; but if she means that the plates lack power and fine technical qualities, the majority of connoisseurs would differ from her in opinion. There is perhaps a tendency to see unusual merit in the sporadic ventures of men who have been signally successful in some particular line of work, and to glorify what would scarcely claim



PEASANT WITH A WHEELBARROW
By J. F. Millet



THE SOWER (*Lithograph*)
By J. F. Millet

etching, could not have been more truly and markedly a born etcher than Millet showed himself to be—few though were the plates and many though were the canvases he worked upon. To depend upon lines, not tones, for expression; to make every line 'tell,' and to use no more lines than are absolutely needed to tell exactly what he wants to say; to speak strongly, concisely, and to the point; to tell us much while saying little; to suggest rather than to elaborate, but to suggest in such a way that the meaning shall be very clear and individual and impressive—

attention if produced by men of less repute. With all due allowance for this natural result of hero-worship, one must accord to Millet high rank as an etcher. Competent judges, I am inclined to think, would agree with Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer in her estimate of Millet as an etcher, and I may be pardoned for here quoting her appreciative words.

"A man who had given his whole life to etching only, who had never thought of painting, and had never cared for those effects proper to painting, and not to



THE SHEPHERDESS KNITTING
By J. F. Millet

these are the things the true etcher tries to do. And these are the things that Millet did with a more magnificent power than any man, perhaps, since Rembrandt.

"Other modern etchings have more charm than his: none have quite so much feeling. Others show more grace and delicacy of touch: none show more force or certainty, and none a more artistic



THE GOOSE TENDER
By J. F. Millet

'economy of means.' Compare one of these prints with the corresponding picture, and you will feel more deeply than ever before how much more important was the intellectual than the technical side of Millet's art. Its technique is always admirable, whatever may be the process chosen; if it were not, the intellectual message would not be told so clearly. But it is never the sort of technique one cares much about for its own sake; certainly never the sort that another man, with a different message to deliver, could wisely try to imitate. It is *a means*, in short, and not *an end*; and a means which gets its interest from its peculiar fitness to help the artist towards his true end, the expression of thought and feeling.

"Even the color that is so beautiful in Millet's best paintings is not, we find, really necessary to express his inmost power. In looking at these etchings we hardly remember the delightful golden tones of the painted 'Gleaners,' the misty springtime atmosphere of the 'Going to Work,' or the rich and tender scheme of the 'Wool-Carder.' The essence of the painter's feeling is here in these few strokes of

black on white; and the essence of his feeling is more valuable than even the splendid glow of color by means of which he enhanced on canvas its effect. Had he not been possessed of a deep, genuine, and contagious sort of feeling—possessed of it above all other modern men—so simple a kind of expression as these etchings show would have had little to attract the observer. But had the expression been simple merely, and not wise as well, had its very simplicity not been the last word of artistic power, intelligence, and subtlety, it would never have conveyed so intense and clear a feeling as now it bids us read. Only a great artist could have felt as Millet did; only a great etcher could have expressed his feeling



A WOMAN SEWING
By J. F. Millet

with the needle as he did." The kindly tribute of a just critic.

It should be said in this connection that the works of no other great etcher gain or lose so much in the process of printing, and that Millet's etchings should be judged, therefore, only by fine proofs. That many dull and lifeless impressions of Millet's plates have been offered to the public goes without saying. Poor printing, however, should not be laid as a charge against the plates themselves. Auguste Delâtre, the artist's friend, who for the most part printed Millet's proofs on old Dutch paper, or on thin Japanese paper of a golden tone, has shown what beauty, luminosity, and harmony can be produced with one of the master's plates, and it is by these well-taken impressions that Millet as an etcher should be judged.

Be it in painting, in pastel, in charcoal drawing, or in etching, it is too early as yet, as Mrs. Ady affirms, to determine the place that Millet will ultimately hold in the eyes of posterity. But the very slowness of the steps by which his fame has been won is the best pledge of its endurance; and however the tide of popular favor may ebb and flow in years to come, one thing is certain: by painting the peasants of the field as he saw them and steadfastly refusing to beautify and idealize them, Millet opened a new path and proclaimed a principle of vital importance in the history of modern art. Others were to carry out this principle on a wider scale and apply it to new subjects, but he was the first who boldly laid down this law and made all future progress possible. Beauty is truth—*le beau c'est le vrai*. This was the one article of faith from which he never swerved, to which he testified both in his writings and in his art, for which he lived and died. And whether we consider him as painter or pastelist, as charcoal artist or etcher, of his glory he can never be deprived. "The artist," Millet himself once said, "is not to be judged by his work, but by his aim." In his eyes the medium which he employed was comparatively insignificant to the message which he had to give. Whatever he produced, paintings in oil or water-color, pastel or crayon drawings, etchings, his aim remained the same. "Every one," he said to Sensier in the early days of their friendship, "ought to have a central thought, *une pensée mère*, which he expresses with all the strength of his soul, and tries to stamp on the hearts of others." Millet had such a central thought, and he has stamped it on the world's heart, and we may further say, on the world's art.



A WOMAN CHURNING
By J. F. Millet

FREDERICK A. RUSSELL.